

Sticks and Stones by Trezza Azzopardi

He races to the top of the dune and looks down onto the strand. There is water and wet sand and dry sand and small pokes of sharp grass dotted along the beach. He stands on the lip of the concrete defence; looks east, to the line of groynes, then west, to the lighthouse in the distance. There's no one he can see, no one he can call to for help. Below him, the drop onto the beach is fifteen, maybe twenty, feet. He jumps because he has to, jumps out into the air, and sees as he falls one more thing; a cloud of white birds hanging on the skyline. There is a hot taste filling his mouth, like molten iron, and a black pain, and the knowledge that his teeth are through his lip.

It's always this same dream that Lewis has, and he does the same thing when he wakes; he reaches up to feel the place where his bottom lip was opened, running a finger over his chin. He has a scar there still, almost imperceptible to the casual eye, like a ghost mouth that never opens, like a horizon. It has been fifteen years since he jumped and fell, and he has never been back to the beach. He has spent his adult life in the heart of England, at the very core of the city, as if putting himself in the dense centre of a world would protect him from another fall off the edge of it. But now he has returned to his mother's house, and the dream is more vivid here, in colour, with sound effects and rising panic, as if it too has finally come home.

“There's a letter for you”, his mother shouts, hearing his footsteps on the stairs,

“I've put it on the table.”

She says no more, but Lewis can hear excitement in her voice, as if letters are the rarest of things. He's been here a month now, and has spoken to no one, apart from his mother, has had no phone calls, certainly no letters, nothing at all from Anna. He pictures her, lying in their bed, her face shocked and tearful, just as the morning he left her.

He takes his mother tea, and finds her sitting at the back of the house, facing the window and the view over the strand. She has a woollen shawl wrapped around her nightie, and pink slippers on her feet. She looks unbearably frail.

“The days are getting longer”, she says, nodding at the light creeping in over the sea. She has said this every morning since the first one. The idea occurs to Lewis that he might still be here come winter, when she'll say, The nights are drawing in. The thought fills him with dread.

She doesn't ask who the letter's from, and as soon as they've had their conversation about what he will do today, he takes the letter upstairs to his room. The envelope has been steamed open. Inside, there's a sheet of folded paper and another envelope with just his name on it, which has also been steamed open. Lewis pauses for a second, sucks in his breath. She might look like a little old lady, but she hasn't changed. He decides not to confront her. The second envelope contains a note from the Headmaster, suggesting that he might like to come in and discuss matters. The plain folded sheet is from Anna. It says: “Geoff Harris dropped this by. He asked about you. I didn't know what I should tell him. Everyone's asking about you. What should I say?”

Lewis puts it to his face. He can't find the scent of her in the words.

He spends his mornings lying on the bed, trying not to think. In spite of his efforts to block it out, the scene comes back repeatedly; the smaller boy with his blazer pulled off his shoulder, and the other two - the two Michaels - pushing him against the wall. There was blood on the boy's lip, and dirt on his face, and paler tracks running down the dirt. He was making no sound. Lewis had seen him in the corridors, with his new uniform and his back bent from the weight of his rucksack. He didn't know his name then, although he would know it too well, later: Paul Fry. He looked like all the other new boys at first; after a week, they'd be kicking their rucksacks along the floor, their shoes would be caked with mud, they'd have a laughing, cynical look in their eyes. Lewis only noticed the boy because he hadn't made it to this stage: his shoes remained shiny, and his blazer was smeared with wiped-off chalk and streams of dried spit. His face wore a haunted look. There were a few like this in every year. A couple of the male staff - Stott and Walker - had a nickname for them: they called them New Pins, and after a while, simply Pins, to denote the ones that wouldn't ever fit in. They individuated the boys by adding to the nickname: Pin-Pong, Pin-Head, and this boy, Pin-Up, on account of his pale, girlish face and curly hair.

The burlier of the two Michaels was stroking Paul Fry's hair now, in a mock-affectionate, teasing fashion. When they saw Lewis, they retreated, laughing. Paul Fry didn't look at all grateful for this intervention: he straightened his blazer and turned away.

Trying to sound like a friend, Lewis said, "Go and wash your face, son."

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In the moments when Lewis isn't thinking about Paul Fry, and what happened afterwards, he's picturing a different outcome. Sometimes, he imagines he's the kind of person that challenges teachers like Stott and Walker, the kind that the Headmaster takes seriously. But here at the edge of the world, he can't think of anything for the sound of the sea. He tries to pretend that the noise is of cars on a rainy road, but there are no cars, no escape from the waves on the beach, the copper-coloured dunes, and the terns, scattering light above the sea.

Lewis was ever running away. It's survival of the fittest, his mother said. She was exasperated with him, fed up of being called in to the school. Try to fit in, she'd say. Don't be such a baby. And finally, Boys will be boys. It's human nature. It's survival of the fittest.

After a while, Lewis stopped telling her. It was easier. But he took her words literally, became expert at running away, honed his survival skills. And he was winning, he *was* surviving, until the day he ran out of corners, and fields, and places to hide: until the day Lewis ran out of land.

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Lewis had asked for the Headmaster for a meeting. He'd been keeping an eye on Paul Fry, observing but not interfering, and had made copious notes. He explained all this to the Head, who was interested, solicitous, even. Harris said he knew there was a problem with the boy Fry. He'd like to take a look at Lewis's notes. It was managed, Lewis thought then, with great efficiency. The next day, Harris came and found him after class.

The matter is in hand, he said. Thank you for your vigilance.

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His bedroom looks exactly as he left it: the same small bunk in the corner; the wardrobe with the door that won't shut; the chest of drawers next to the bed. He pulls the drawers open, looking for paper. He'll write to Anna. Maybe she'll come to visit him. The chest is crammed with his mother's clothes. In the last drawer, he finds a pile of old magazines and a small collection of pebbles. Each one is opaline white, round and smooth. Rose quartz, his mother said, when he brought her the first one, Looks like any old stone until it's wet.

Lewis had found it on his very first day on the beach. They had fled the city for a new life. They had fled his step-father, a man who was too *handy* with his hands, his mother said. She said they'd run away to the end of the earth. She wasn't joking.

Lewis picks up a pebble and licks it, tasting old salt and stale pot-pourri. When things were difficult, he would go to the strand and find his mother a new piece of quartz. He was on his way to do that when he spotted the boys, ambling slowly behind him. They looked as if they weren't chasing anyone, as if they were just going for a stroll. They had never come this far before.

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Eventually, Anna got fed up with him.

“It's become an obsession,” she said, “You have to stop now.” At first, she wanted to know about the bullies, about their family life. But he wanted to tell her about Paul Fry. “Bullies are bullies,” he said, “What matters is the boy.”

Later, she'd sigh when he came in from work, with a look on her face just like the one his mother used to wear. She'd even used the same words.

“What's happened now?” she'd ask, almost bored. After a while, she kept out of his way. He could make his notes in peace.

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The boys were carrying something: fishing rods, perhaps. But he'd never seen them fishing. He saw them at school, he saw them on corners, a glimpse of them as he fled; as twin silhouettes under a street-lamp, smoking cigarettes. He got to know the look of them from a distance. Lewis was careful: they'd never caught him yet. He glanced back over his shoulder. He couldn't be sure: were they fishing rods? Or sticks? Or iron bars? He began walking more quickly, sand coming in around his plimsolls, skidding on a patch of wet moss, in a panic, feeling the iron crushing his skull, so he was running now, up the dunes and over to meet the freezing wind off the sea. He will see water and wet sand and dry sand. He will stand on the lip of the concrete defence. He will jump, because he has to.

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A broken arm, concussion, and twelve stitches in his lower lip. Lewis fingered the stitches as he will finger the scar, every day for the rest of his life. His tongue, bitten and thick, stopped him from telling his mother the truth. She talked about the nice boys who found him, how he would have to go and thank them when he got out of hospital.

“If they hadn't been there fishing, you could have lay there 'til the tide came in. They saved your life!”

Even when his mouth healed, and it was easier to say the words, she didn't believe him.

“It's all in your mind,” she said, which is what the Headmaster implied on Lewis's last day, after suggesting he should take some time off. It was the day before Paul Fry was found.

Lewis stares at the pebbles and understands what his mother felt: worry, rage, powerlessness. Survival of the fittest, she'd said. And just when she thought he was settled and happy at last, he comes back. Except, in her eyes, he has simply run away again.

Lewis puts the stones in his pocket. He will stop running, he thinks. He has survived, after all. When he reaches the shoreline, he throws the pebbles, one by one, back into the sea. He doesn't know what he will say to Anna, or to Geoff Harris. He knows there is nothing, now, that he can say to Paul Fry. Lewis lies down, puts his ear to the sand, and listens to the humming earth.